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Does Environmental Education Matter?

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It is commonly recognized that there are significant barriers, both internal and external, to eco-products acquisition (Connell, 2010). Studies found that gender was a significant factor when comparing consumers' attitude toward environment and their willingness to pay more for green products (i.e. Laroche, Bergeron, and Barbaro-Forleo, 2001). Laroche et al. (2001) also found that eco-literacy being a significant predictor of consumers' attitude and behavior toward environment. This conclusion is also supported by other studies (i.e. Cheah and Phau, 2011). However, when eco-fashion is in question, brand and explicit message also play a significant role (Yan, Hyllegard and Blaesi, 2012). Although Generation Y college students are often used as convenience samples in different studies, not many studies have focused on both internal and external factors to investigate Generation Y college students' willingness to pay more for green fashion products.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of environmental education (internal factor) on Generation Y's willingness to pay more for eco-friendly fashion products by controlling external factor, product and product description. Based on findings from previous studies, three specific research questions were developed: Is gender a significant factor affecting this consumer group's attitude towards environment and their willingness to pay more for green fashion products? Does environmental education affect Generation Y's attitude towards environment? 3. Does environmental education affect Generation Y's willingness to pay more for green fashion products? Gender, knowledge or eco-education and attitudes are regarded as internal factors while product and product description or labeling are external factors.

A random survey by a paper and pencil survey instrument was conducted on campus. The scales, measuring attitude towards environment and willingness to pay more for eco-friendly products, were adopted from the study by Laroche et al. (2001). Eco-education was measured asking the respondents if they had taken an environmental related course or not. To control external factors, a detailed description of a 100% organic cotton T-shirt produced by TSdesign was included in the survey and a purchasing intention question was asked about this specific T-shirt. A total of 126 completed and usable surveys were analyzed via SPSS. Cronbach's α was used to check the reliability of the adopted scales. One-way ANOVA or t-test was used to compare means between groups with significant criterion set at 0.05.

The two 6-item scales, measuring environment attitude and willingness to pay more for environmental friendly products, were found reliable with a Cronbach's α of 0.86 and 0.88 respectively. The 126 random selected respondents consisted of 42.9% male and 57.1% female students of different majors (five categories). Among them, 41.3% had taken course(s) related to environmental or sustainability education while the remaining 58.7% had not taken such courses yet. Between the groups with and without eco-education, significant differences were found in both attitude towards environment (mean1=1.45, mean2=1.98, $p=0.0025$) and in willingness to pay more for the 100% organic cotton T-shirt (mean1=3.83, mean2=3.34, $p=0.0219$). When gender was considered, it was found that explicit product information affected female respondents (mean = 3.72) more than male (mean = 3.29). No significant difference was found between groups of different majors ($df = 4$, $F = 1.194$, $p=0.317$).

The results of the study demonstrated that environment education had a significant impact upon the two internal factors, attitudes towards environment and willingness to pay more for eco-friendly products. Consistent with findings from other studies, this study also found that gender was a significant demographic factor that female Generation Y college students had a higher willingness to pay more for eco-friendly products when more explicit product information was present, such as durability, environmental attributes and price. The findings of this study implied the importance of environmental literacy education and also the importance of marketing design when promoting green fashion products. One main limitation of the study is its small sample size. Future studies could expand the study to a larger sample size, and also do an experimental design of pretest and posttest comparison of same student groups enrolled in eco-education courses. These studies will help to generate more evidence illustrating the relationship between eco-education and consumers' attitudes towards environment as well as their willingness to pay more for eco-friendly products.

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